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# CREATING A DIALOGIC SPACE FOR RESEARCH: A READING CONFERENCE IN A CHINESE COMPLEMENTARY SCHOOL

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## Abstract

*This article draws on research carried out in a Chinese complementary school in Scotland. The research focused on children's experience of learning to read Chinese and on the strategies that they used to support their learning. Here, I provide an account of one particular aspect of this research, namely the creation of a dialogic space for gathering and interpreting data through the setting up of six reading conferences between individual students and their teacher. The reading conferences involved two broad activities. Both were audio-recorded. First each child was asked to read aloud a passage written in Chinese (a fable that they were familiar with). This was followed by a think-aloud session which took the form of a three-way dialogue between the child, the teacher and me (as the researcher). In this article, I show how the reading conferences unfolded by drawing on one example – that of Ying Yan<sup>i</sup> – an eight year old boy of Hong Kong heritage. I also detail some of the insights into Ying Yan's learning strategies that emerged from the three-way dialogue during the think-aloud sessions. The article concludes with reflection on: (1.) the particular advantages that accrue from creating such dialogic spaces for research, especially at the stage of data interpretation; and on (2.) the value of dialogic methodology in educational settings characterized by considerable linguistic and cultural diversity.*

## Introduction

Complementary schools and classes are community-run forms of educational provision for children and young people which have the aim of supporting the maintenance and development of their heritage languages, literacies and cultures. This type of provision usually takes place at the weekend and, although mainly located on mainstream school premises, the learning that takes place in complementary classes has long remained invisible to mainstream teachers. Recent research in complementary schools and classrooms has now begun to shed some light on the nature and scope of the learning experiences of the children involved. Research in Chinese

complementary schools has a relatively short history, but in the last few years, we have witnessed the emergence of an array of qualitative studies in a variety of locations, including Scotland (Bell 2011; Hancock 2012), the wider United Kingdom (UK) (Mau et al. 2009; Li Wei 2014) and other countries (Curd-Christiansen 2008; Li and Juffermans 2014).

Some of these investigations have employed classroom observation and audio-recordings of classroom interaction. They have drawn attention to a variety of pedagogical approaches involving the use and production of texts. These teaching approaches include long-established cultural practices such as learners reading aloud, individually or together, teachers providing corrective feedback on learners' pronunciation and intonation, the learning of classical texts by heart and repeated copying of complex character configurations using a precise sequence of strokes. Hu (2002) describes these practices as the 'four Rs' – passive reception, repetition, recitation and reproduction.

Both Hancock (2012) and Lü (2014) have pointed out that teachers and learners in Chinese complementary schools co-create ecologies of practice and permissible spaces for two approaches to teaching and learning: the rigid and mundane literacy activities frequently associated with learning the Chinese script, and a less prescriptive pedagogy where both teachers' and children's ideas about teaching and learning are blended. Teachers sometimes incorporate language games into lessons to enhance children's understanding of the structural components of compound Chinese characters and they develop narratives concerning the pictographic origins of characters to support the memorization process. The development of these kinds of literacy practices around texts is often a product of the teachers' attempts to take account of children's diverse backgrounds and experiences in classroom activities but it is also a response to children's requests for more enjoyable lessons.

This article focuses on children learning to read Chinese in a complementary school in Scotland. It draws on a specific data source: that of one-to-one reading conferences between six children and their teacher and it takes a close look at the insights gleaned from just one of these reading conferences – a conference conducted between an eight-year old boy, Ying Yan, and his teacher. I also show how the reading conference created a space for a three-way dialogue between the boy, his teacher and me (as the researcher) – a space in which we were able to explore his learning strategies in some detail. The main argument underpinning the article is that there are considerable advantages that accrue from narrowing the research lens in this way, particularly when conducting research in the context of diversity.

This article is organised into seven parts: The first part describes some of the features of Chinese orthography and some of the issues arising in research into early literacy development in Chinese. The second part provides a brief overview of the different groups of Chinese in Scotland, and then introduces the Chinese School where my fieldwork was conducted. The third and fourth parts outline the nature and scope of the research I undertook and then go on to show how I narrowed the research lens through the setting up of the research conferences and how I designed the research to include a dialogic element. In the fifth part, I focus in on the reading conference with the boy I am calling Ying Yan. I introduce those participating in it and I describe the way it unfolded. In the sixth part, I discuss some of the insights that I gleaned from this particular reading conference. Then, in the seventh and final part, I conclude the article with my reflections on the advantages that flow from building a dialogic approach into data gathering and data interpretation. I also argue that this kind of approach is well suited to research in schools and classrooms that are characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity.

## **Early literacy development in Chinese: some insights from research**

The literature associated with children reading in English is diverse and extensive, whilst reading in Chinese has only recently attracted attention (McBride-Chang and Chen 2003). Any study of children's approaches to reading in Chinese complementary schools must take account of a number of interrelated factors. These include the nature of the writing system, a consideration of the socio-cultural context in which the learning takes place and both the pedagogic conventions and literacy practices associated with the teaching and learning of reading (Wang and Chang 2013). Some account also needs to be taken of the knowledge gained by children from learning to read English in mainstream schools, the influential role of the home and learning about literacies from significant adults and siblings (Curdt-Christiansen 2009). All these lived experiences will inform children's learning styles and their understandings of what counts as reading in the scripts they use in their daily lives.

During initial literacy development, learners draw on their knowledge of their oral language. The phonological structure of spoken varieties of Chinese is relatively simple compared to English but the small number of unique syllables results in a large number of homophones. This places demands on readers as they map speech onto a large number of characters. The number of difficulties stemming from the homophones are reduced to some extent by the use of four tones in Mandarin and nine tones in Cantonese<sup>ii</sup>. An additional challenge for some children is that the language of instruction at the Chinese school may be different from the language variety spoken at home. Thus, for example, Hakka speakers often learn to read through the medium of Cantonese or Mandarin.

Children learning Chinese need to acquire knowledge of at least 3,000 characters to meet their basic literacy needs. As the script does not have the grapheme-phoneme correspondences of

alphabetic languages, it is commonly assumed that Chinese children acquire characters only by memorization or by using a ‘look and say’ approach to reading. However, Wu et al. (2009) have shown that written Chinese has a clear logic and that if children’s morphological awareness is fostered, this can have a positive effect on their reading development.

The majority of modern Chinese characters are compound characters, consisting of two components, with a radical taking a specified position within the character. The function of the radical may be twofold: to provide information on the meaning (the semantic radical) or to provide a possible clue as to the pronunciation of the entire character (the phonetic radical). The semantic radical usually occupies the top or left position within a character and the phonetic radical is usually located to the right or at the bottom of the compound character. According to Wang and Yang (2008), as children learn more and more characters, they internalise the positional rules for the radicals and begin to systematically use this rich information in interpreting character components to infer meaning or pronunciation, when they encounter unknown characters, and they use this radical awareness to become better readers.

The significance of the semantic radical is demonstrated by the fact that Chinese dictionaries use the radical to help locate characters and many Chinese teachers use the radical in vocabulary building exercises (Hancock 2012). For example, the radical [口] (*hau2*) “mouth” is a component of the characters [吻] (*man5*) “kiss”; [唱] (*coeng3*), “sing”; [喝] (*hot6*), “drink”; [吃] (*hek3*) “eat”, each clearly related to the meaning of “mouth”. The idea that phonology plays a role in Chinese character processing has only recently gained attention (Chen et al. 2014). However, the mapping between the information provided by the phonetic radical and character pronunciation is less systematic than the mapping between information given by the semantic

radical and the meaning of the character. Hanley et al. (1999) provide an in-depth discussion of the reasons behind the unsystematic nature of this mapping.

When children read, a second facet of morphological awareness comes into play as they process words at text level. As characters represent morphemes, they can be a lexical unit by themselves or a morpheme within a multisyllabic word. However, there is research showing that Chinese readers are more likely to encounter words represented by two or more characters in their daily reading (Li and McBride-Chang 2014). For example, ‘poet’ [詩人] (si1 jan4) consists of two characters ‘poem’ and ‘person’ and the multi-character ‘library’ [圖書館] consists of ‘picture’, ‘book’ and ‘hall’. Such combinations of characters create a new meaning which may be different from the meaning of the individual characters. As characters all convey meaning and words are not marked by spaces in writing, children need to use a holistic reading strategy to make appropriate parsing decisions to build an understanding of the text.

### **The Chinese in Scotland and the school in this study**

The Chinese constitute the third largest minoritised group in Scotland, after the groups of Polish and Pakistani heritage. Official statistics reveal that between 2001 and 2011 the Chinese population grew to more than twice its size (National Records of Scotland 2013). Now 32% of the Chinese living in Scotland were born in the United Kingdom and a large proportion of these have a Hong Kong heritage, although it is difficult to say from the census data available to date how many of these Chinese were Scottish-born or have their origin in other countries.

Both Hancock (2006) and Bell (2013) have characterized the population within the Chinese diaspora currently residing in Scotland as multi-layered in terms of geographical origin, levels of education, language allegiances and affiliations. The heterogeneous nature of the

Scottish Chinese population is reflected in the range of Chinese schools serving the diverse needs of local families. For example, the city of Edinburgh hosts four Chinese schools: two for Cantonese and Hakka-speaking children with heritage ties to Hong Kong; one which is affiliated to the True Jesus Church and which is also for Cantonese and Hakka-speaking children with heritage ties to Hong Kong and one set up by academics and parents with professional backgrounds for Mandarin-speaking children from mainland China. The families in the latter group tend to take up only short-term residence in Scotland.

The Chinese school at the centre of the study presented here is located can be categorised as the first type of provision described above. It was founded in 1985 and caters for over 90 children and young people of school age. In addition, there are two classes for adults wanting to develop conversational skills in either Mandarin or English. The pupils come from a wide geographical area and the school provides a minibus to encourage attendance. The majority of the children are from families with heritage ties to Hong Kong although there are a growing number of dual heritage children and white Scottish children whose parents want them to learn Chinese. The school meets on a Sunday morning and has its premises in a mainstream secondary school in the central belt of Scotland. It is a registered charity but is self-funded through tuition fees and supported by an active parents' committee. Instruction is provided for two hours followed by a third hour for cultural and sporting activities.

The school follows the curriculum developed by the United Kingdom Federation of Chinese Schools (UKFCS). The eight classes are structured around the core UKFCS textbooks. All classes are taught in Cantonese except for the early stages (Grade 1 and 2). In these stages, Mandarin is used and children learn *Pinyin* along with simplified characters. Because of the wide-range of language and literacy abilities, children are allocated to classes according to their



literacy-related abilities rather than age. This leads to the common occurrence of siblings being in the same class. This practice of mixed-age grouping can have detrimental effects on an older child's self-esteem but it can also promote positive learning relationships as this type of vertical learning environment supports scaffolding by peers and siblings.

At the time when the research was carried out, eleven teachers made up the teaching team and, like other complementary schools, they differed considerably in terms of age, employment, sociolinguistic histories and teaching experience (Wu 2006). Only one of the teachers was male. Two of the teachers had taught in Hong Kong, but only the head teacher had been employed in mainstream education. Almost all the teachers were parent-volunteers. An annual challenge for the head teacher was to enlist volunteers and provide induction for potential teachers recruited from among the students on one-year post-graduate programmes at the nearby University.

### **The nature and scope of the research**

I gained access to this Chinese school since I knew the head teacher well in a personal and professional capacity. We had worked together in the past in a local authority Bilingual Support Service. I had also supported the Chinese school over a number of years in developing curriculum materials. Once the fieldwork began, I remained conscious of my status as a 'research guest' (Delamont 2002) and the ethical issue of intrusion was constantly borne in mind as I attempted to deal with fieldwork relationships in a sensitive manner. The purpose of the research was explained to all participants and consent was gained from teachers, parents and children.

The data presented in this article is drawn from a larger body of work and from fieldwork conducted over four years (2005-2009) (see Hancock, 2010, 2012, 2014, for further details). In the children's homes, I conducted semi-structured interviews with parents to build a picture of

family literacy practices (Hancock 2006). I carried out extended observations of pedagogical practices in three Cantonese classes (Grades 3 to 5). I also conducted semi-structured interviews with eight of the teachers in the school (Hancock 2012). As the research progressed, the observations became more focused, with a view to gaining insights into the children's approaches to reading Chinese texts. I made arrangements to audio-record six teacher-learner interactions. The six children were 8-9 years of age and had diverse backgrounds in terms of place of origin, educational experiences, language proficiency and affiliations to different languages and literacies (Hancock 2010). Each of the children were recorded, in turn, as they were engaged in an individual reading conference with their teacher. The recordings took place outside the classroom.

### **Narrowing the research lens: planning and carrying out the reading conferences**

In planning the reading conferences, I built on the socio-constructivist tradition of research on reading. This research has employed miscue analysis (MCA) and think-aloud protocols (e.g. Goodman 1969; Wallace, 1988). Goodman (1969) argued that MCA provides a “window into the reading process”. MCA has been widely taken up in mainstream schools within the English-speaking world as a diagnostic tool (see Wilde, 2000, for details). It has also been used in work with children for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL) (Gregory, 1996). In addition, it has been successfully adopted in research into the reading strategies of bilingual (Spanish/English) readers in the United States (Brown et al. 1996). Yet, as Chang et al. (1992) have pointed out, MCA is seldom employed for analysing the strategies that young learners adopt in reading Chinese.

So I decided to incorporate an MCA component into the six reading conferences in my study. Each child was asked to read aloud a passage from the textbook that was being used in

their class in the complementary school. This reading was then followed by a think-aloud session which was organised so as to create a space for a three-way dialogue between each individual child, their teacher and me (as the researcher). Some modification to MCA was required to adjust to the unique characteristics of the Chinese script. As I indicated earlier, the main graphic unit of the Chinese writing system is the character (which maps onto a monosyllabic morpheme). The unit of miscue coding (e.g. substitutions, insertions or omissions) thus had to be at the individual character level rather than at word level, as in the miscue analysis of the reading of texts in English. Although it is acknowledged that processes such as miscues in reading aloud cannot be divorced from the fuller picture of reading continuous text, it was felt that, given the way texts are taught in Chinese schools such as the one in this study, and given the role of memorisation in learning and the arbitrary nature of the graphic representation of ‘words’ in Chinese, the focus should be on how children recognise, remember and decode individual compound characters. According to Li and McBride-Chang (2014) it is difficult to determine whether children adopt character or word-based processing when they are reading.

In each of the reading conferences in the study, the children were asked to read aloud a text from the Chinese textbook used in class since the children were familiar with it and could make full use of their knowledge of the content. As the children read the texts, I took on the role of observer. The teacher listened to the reading and, if a child paused or asked for assistance, she provided an encouraging response. After this we moved on to the think-aloud session, when all three of us engaged in a dialogue about this reading experience, about the child’s reading strategies and about the areas of difficulty signalled by the miscues. The discussion also broadened out to include the textual and mnemonic strategies that individual children had adopted. The aim of the discussion was to enable them to reflect on and give their own account

of their strategies. As in other research with children (Alderson, 2013), the Chinese children in this study were viewed as experts on their own lived experiences and their emic perspectives and understandings were taken into account. All contributions and types of information were considered equally valid as the teacher, the children and I collectively unpacked the process of Chinese literacy learning. The teacher provided ample space for the children to read and think aloud. She listened respectfully as they articulated their learning in ways which were meaningful to them. Of relevance here is that the Chinese character for “listening” [聽] is made up of the components [耳] “ear”, [目] “eye”, and [心] “heart” to signify listening as a process drawing on the senses and on feelings. Whilst there was still an asymmetry of power in the relationship that the teacher and I were developing with the children in this setting, we endeavoured to overcome this in the ways described above.

### **One reading conference**

#### ***The participants, their language and literacy repertoires and their past experiences in education***

The child taking part in this particular reading conference was Ying Yan. At the time, he was eight-years old. He had had two years of schooling in Hong Kong before his parents had moved to the UK: one year in kindergarten and one year in primary school. During these two years he had gained a foundation in Chinese literacy. He had also acquired some knowledge of English because of the influential role played by the language in aspects of Hong Kong schooling and society. Ying Yan had been attending the Chinese school since arriving in Scotland at the age of seven. By the time this research was carried out, Ying Yan had therefore

had experience of several educational institutions and two different national education systems. This meant that he was able to draw on a range of language and literacy resources and on knowledge of different ways of learning to read as he developed his learner identity in Scotland.

The Chinese teacher, who conducted this and the other five reading sessions with the children, was born in Hong Kong where she was educated in both Cantonese and English. She had gained a teaching qualification in Hong Kong before moving to Scotland with her family. As well as working in the Chinese school she was also employed part-time as a Bilingual Home-School liaison worker for the local education authority. Her work involved acting as an interpreter and supporting Chinese families and schools for a variety of educational purposes including first language assessments, transition arrangements and inter-agency working.

My role in this literacy event was that of researcher, with a particular interest in education in linguistically and culturally diverse settings and in complementary schools. My interest in early reading stems from the time when I worked as a primary school teacher and then as a member of the Bilingual Support service for a local education authority in Scotland. As I indicated earlier, before I began this study, I had known staff at this Chinese complementary school for a number of years and I had supported them in developing curriculum materials. I am not a fluent speaker of Chinese but I do have knowledge of the Chinese writing system and of research into early literacy development in Chinese.

### ***The way in which this literacy event unfolded***

At the beginning of the reading conference, there was a fair amount of negotiation between Ying Yan and his teacher about what reading would be audio-recorded. This also happened in the reading conferences with the other children. Initially Ying Yan wanted to read *A Traveller's*

*Song* [遊子吟] by the Tang dynasty poet, Meng Jiao [孟郊]. Ying Yan quickly read this short poem as he had learnt it by heart. Then he read a seven character lined poem about the *Ching Ming Festival* [清明] which describes the custom of performing ancestor worship rituals. Again the poem was read verbatim without any miscues. Memorization of poetic texts is a common literacy practice in school contexts in Hong Kong. Children learn to recite by heart 5 to 10 poems in their first years of schooling (Lau 2006). Looking back on his experience in Hong Kong, Ying Yan described these reading rituals in classrooms as follows:

The teacher reads three sentences then tells the class to read it with her. You have to memorise it without looking at the page. The teacher says ‘close the book and read it out’.

Some researchers (e.g. Watkins and Biggs, 2001) have argued that children gain familiarity with different texts and literary conventions through the process of memorisation and this activity allows learners to produce their own versions of written texts.

Like the other children in this study, Ying Yan, clearly preferred to read familiar texts. He, and the other five children, expressed their reluctance to read unseen texts by saying: “we have not learnt this one yet” and “we have not done this in class”. Some of the children asked the teacher if they could rehearse the reading of the text before being audio-recorded saying “I want to practise”. The teacher finally made it clear to Ying Yan that the initial reading aloud activity in the reading conference was not a test. Finally, with this reassurance, he read the fable *The Blind Man Touches the Elephant* [盲人摸象].

After Ying Yan had finished reading the fable, we moved on to the think-aloud session. All three of us listened to the audio-recording and then we discussed each of the miscues in turn. Most of the discussion took place between Ying Yan and his teacher. It took place primarily in English but, on occasion, English, and Cantonese were intertwined”. I sometimes asked questions to both Ying Yan and to his teacher. My questions to Ying Yan were designed to elicit his own account of his strategies for

learning to read particular aspects of written Chinese. My questions to his teacher focused on aspects of pedagogy and on day to day classroom routines in the complementary school. In the last part of the session, we turned to Ying Yan's experiences of learning to read in the complementary school. We also looked at his copy of the textbook and discussed with him some of the annotations that he had made on the text. In addition, the teacher spoke about her perceptions of him as a learner.

### **Insights from this reading conference**

In this section, I present the main insights gained from the three-way dialogue between Ying Yan, his teacher and me, as we gathered data and interpreted it together. These insights relate to his learning strategies and the ways in which he dealt with the particular challenges of character reading. I begin with the points that we discussed towards the end of the think-aloud session: that is, with Ying Yan's strategy of circling new characters on the texts that he read and annotating them. I then go on to the insights gleaned from our discussion of his miscues.

#### ***Dealing with new characters 'on the page'***

Ying Yan had two broad strategies for dealing with new, unfamiliar characters. Both involved marking up parts of his textbook. I discuss each of these strategies in turn below.

#### ***Circling new characters in a text, then repeated writing practice***

According to his teacher, Ying Yan often circled new vocabulary highlighted by her on the page of his textbook. This practice is seen below in Figure 1 in a text entitled: "Visit to the doctor". In this text, he had circled five words, including [針頭] (zam1 tau4) "needle head". Once he had identified new words in this way, he then copied the new characters out at home and learned them methodically. The teacher noted that he was particularly conscientious and always practised his Chinese homework. He also had support in this from his mother. As Ying Yan

himself explained: “I give it to my Mum to check it. She goes through it and sees if I write it right or wrong”.



Figure 1: Visit to the doctor

As this example from his textbook shows, he was more likely to pick out words with two or more characters than single-character words in his reading. This strategy resonates with the research findings of a study conducted by Li and McBride-Chang (2014).

*Annotating new characters: using transliteration or Chinese homophones*

Ying Yan occasionally annotated new Chinese characters read aloud by the teacher, using transliteration, to help him to remember the spoken words associated with these characters. In



doing this, he was drawing on his bilingual resources available within his linguistic repertoire, including knowledge of alphabetic modes of writing. This particular literacy practice revealed his developing metalinguistic insights. He was clearly gaining an appreciation of the nature of different scripts and the relationship between these different ways of writing and the sounds of different languages (Hancock 2012). An example of Ying Yan's transliterations can be found in Figure 2. On this text, he had transliterated the Chinese words 'meu' and 'la' above the characters, 廟 and 拿. When asked about this technique Ying Yan described his approach as writing the words 'in English':

I don't use them often but if I know the word I don't need to write it in English but if I don't know it at all I have to write it in English. I'm thinking: "How does this sound in English?"

Ying Yan also wrote characters that represented words with the same pronunciation next to other characters in the text to support his learning. His use of this strategy is also shown in Figure 2 below. For example, Ying Yan had annotated the character [終] (dzung1) "end" with [中] (dzung1) "middle". This particular annotation is placed just below the printed character in Figure 2.

九 有志竟成(二)

窮和尚回到廟裏，拿了碗和木杖，便離開四川到南海去。因為沒有錢坐車，也沒有錢雇船，所以是走路去的。

一路上，肚子餓了，就向人化緣，得到食物充饑；天黑了，就睡在山野。這樣過了一年，窮和尚終於到了南海。

又過了一年，窮和尚從南海回到四川，去拜訪富和尚，並且送他一部從南海帶回來的佛經。這時候，富和尚仍舊沒有準備好，還是不能動身，很慚愧地對窮和尚說：「我雖然比你富有，但毅力卻遠遠不及你啊，你真是有志竟成呀！」



Figure 2: If you persevere you will succeed

In the research literature about the early development of Chinese literacy, Wong (1992) has suggested that the distinctive pronunciations of particular characters may not be entirely clear to those listening during reading aloud activities. When Ying Yan's teacher took a close look at his use of character homophones for annotations of this kind, she found that he did sometimes make errors when using this strategy, for example, when matching [羊] (joeng4) "sheep" with [樣] (joeng6) "way" <sup>iii</sup> as shown in Figure 2 above. In fact, detecting tonal equivalence and

differentiation in Cantonese posed a challenge not only for the children but also the teacher. This was acknowledged by the teacher who had to refer to a Chinese dictionary to double check Ying Yan's use of characters. She commented on this as follows: 'I made a slight mistake in the sound of the character [樣]. It should be joeng6, and not joeng4.'

### ***Insights from three-way discussion of Ying Yan's miscues***

As I pointed out earlier, the fable read aloud by Ying Yan - *The Blind Man Touches the Elephant* [盲人摸象] - was a story that he and his fellow pupils had already encountered in class. The philosophical theme in the fable is that when people are opinionated but lack insufficient knowledge, this is a kind of blindness. As he read the fable, Ying Yan made several miscues. Five themes emerged from these miscues and they were discussed with him afterward during the think-aloud session. I will discuss each of the themes in turn below.

#### *Dealing with visually similar characters*

Firstly, Ying Yan had difficulty with cases where characters had similar visual features. For example, Ying Yan read aloud the character [名] (ming4) "name" instead of the visually similar [各] (gok3) "each". When this was discussed with Ying Yan, he referred to the appearance of the character, saying: "it looks like this one" and he 'wrote' the character [名] (ming4) "name" on the palm of his hand. He used his finger to trace out the strokes of the character. This kinaesthetic approach was a strategy used by a number of children at the Chinese school to activate knowledge of stroke order rules and densely packed character configurations. They also did finger writing in the air.

Miscues on characters with similar visual features is a common phenomenon among young Chinese readers. This observation has been made in recent research (e.g. McBride-Chang and Ho, 2000). Ying Yan's teacher confirmed this, drawing on her own teaching experience in Hong Kong. She said:

That happens frequently at primary school in Hong Kong. They don't see the difference between the two characters. There may be only one stroke difference but they may not realise it when they are reading fast. They are hard to differentiate.

### *Interpreting complex characters*

The second theme to emerge in our discussion of the miscues related to visually complex characters. We had, for example, noted during the reading aloud activity that Ying Yan paused when he encountered the character [繩] (sing4) "rope". This is a visually complex character although a clue to its interpretation existed within the text that Ying Yan was reading. This was the point in the text where one of the blind men in the fable was touching the elephant's tail. On encountering complex characters that are unfamiliar, children learning to read in Chinese have to examine the syntactic and semantic relations among neighbouring characters whilst segmenting character strings into meaningful units. However, they are hampered in this by the lack of clear 'word' boundaries. This point has also been made in the research on early reading in Chinese (Lin et al. 2011). When Ying Yan paused, he looked for reassurance from the teacher who quickly modelled for him the correct reading of the character. When I asked her about this teaching strategy, she responded that she could see that Ying Yan had come up against a complex character and she hoped that, by providing him with the sound/character correspondence immediately, he would remember the character the next time as a sight-sound entity. She also stressed the importance of maintaining the momentum of the reading. This

teacher strategy was clearly related to the characteristics of the Chinese writing system and the need for continual practice in the recognition of characters such as [繩] (sing4) “*rope*”.

#### *Drawing on knowledge of the story*

The third theme that emerged from our conversation about Ying Yan’s miscues related to the value of drawing on knowledge of the story in interpreting complex characters. As indicated above, Ying Yan was already familiar with the fable as it had been read in class. When reading aloud on this occasion, he drew on this knowledge but forgot some of the detail. There were two blind men in the story, who reacted in different ways to feeling the elephant’s ear. One identified it as [傘] (saan3) “*umbrella*”, and the other identified it as [扇] (sin3) “*fan*”. However, Ying Yan substituted a word describing the second blind man’s reaction for that describing the first blind man’s reaction. This substitution actually made sense though the reading of the actual character was not correct. This miscue did however suggest that Ying Yan was making meaningful predictions in reading the text.

#### *Learning about compound characters*

The fourth theme that emerged from our discussions related to compound characters. Ying Yan read aloud a character with a word that has a similar semantic element and a similar graphic element instead of the correct one. According to Chang et al. (1992) miscues relating to characters with high graphic similarity tend to be on lexical items with a close semantic relationship. An example of this type of miscue is the semantically acceptable substitution of [腳] (goek3) “*foot*” for [腿] (teoi2) “*leg*”. Both characters contain the same radical [月] (jyut5) “*moon*” which always appears in characters for body parts such as [肚] (tou5) “*belly*” and [腰]

(jiu1) “*waist*”. When we discussed this miscue during the think-aloud session, the teacher pointed out that it is common for inexperienced readers to pronounce the character by only looking at part of the character. She explained this type of potential error among children learning to read Chinese in the following terms:

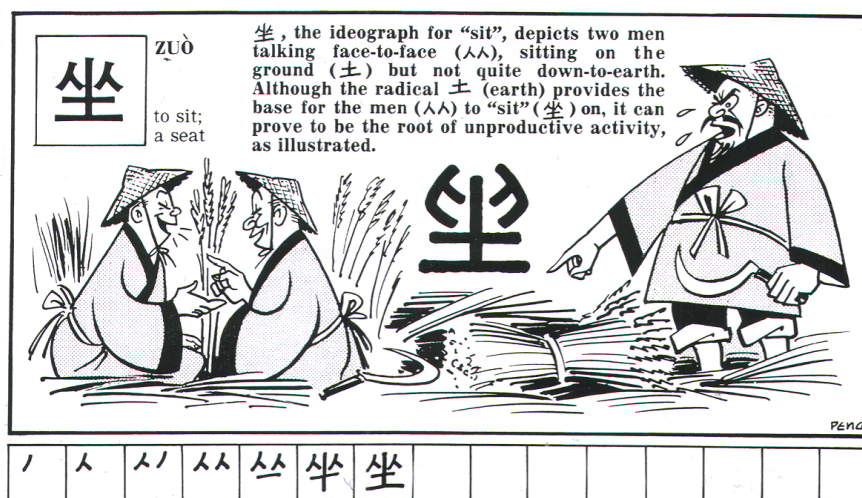
Sometimes they get it right. Sometimes they get it wrong. In English you can guess the pronunciation. If they haven't learnt a character they may not know how to read it and don't know the meaning. Sometimes the teachers say 'guess it' and they only read part of the character.

This point about the need for awareness of the challenges posed by compound characters was discussed at some length. Ying Yan compared approaches to literacy in his two schools in Scotland, saying that the mainstream school concentrated on writing and on grammar and punctuation, whereas the Chinese school focused on vocabulary development, character identification, the formation of characters, how meanings are conveyed and on practice in writing characters. In his words:

In my school they just talk about grammar. Like where to put commas and speech marks. In the Chinese school we talk about words. We write new words and the teacher tells us what the meaning is.

This was confirmed by the teacher who stated that she sometimes explained the origins of characters to the children to help them learn. She said: “I have to teach them the characters so that they understand.” Her comments echoed the ‘naming, explaining and defining it’ approach used by adults when teaching children Chinese characters (Li and Rao 2000: 88). The teacher went on to illustrate her point with reference to one character [坐] (co5) ‘to sit’. This is shown in Figure 3 below. The figure demonstrates the way in which two parts of the character are combined: the radical ‘earth’ [土] and two people sitting [人人], facing each other. The character has a pictographic element and compound meanings. Pointing to the part of the character that

designates two people sitting, she explained how she introduced the character to the children in her class: “I say these are people and they are sitting on the soil. In the olden days they didn’t have chairs and they had to sit on planet earth”. The two parts of the character are illustrated in the figure with an image of two Chinese people (in a hay field) sitting on the ground. The image evokes a time when peasant farmers had no chairs or table sit on.



**Figure 3**

Source: *The Straits Times (1980) Fun with Chinese Characters. The Straits Times: Singapore*

### *Dealing with compound characters: using pictographic cues and personal mnemonics*

The fifth theme that emerged from our three-way dialogue after the reading related to Ying Yan’s own personalised mnemonics and his use of pictographic cues. Ying Yan’s comments showed that he was keen to talk about and dissect the different parts of compound characters. For example, he said: ‘I’ll remember the upper part first and then the lower part’. He also showed awareness of principles used in teaching reading in Chinese, such as taking account of positional rules and the left and top/bottom radical (see Ho et al. 2003, for details of these principles). An interesting aspect of this discussion with Ying Yan was that he gave a number of imaginative responses. For example, Ying Yan’s comment on the character [杏] “star” was: “That like ...in

the sky ... something shining if you put them together it's like a star in the sky". His comment on the character [草] (cou2) "grass" was: "The top bit looks like grass so I am thinking of something like grass...like a flower...I might guess the meaning and the sound". This echoes work by Pine et al. (2003) in which children were observed making use of narrative and idiosyncratic explanations to remember a character or part of a character.

Children, like Ying Yan, are involved in what Tan and Perfetti (1999) call 'problem solving'. That is, as they gain familiarity with characters, learners can use their knowledge of the component parts of characters to infer meaning or derive clues about the pronunciation when encountering unfamiliar characters. Ying Yan's ability to identify and manipulate radical information when reading, as outlined above, supports the premise that children do not only acquire Chinese characters through memorisation, learning each one as an unanalysed visual whole. Instead morphological awareness also appears to be central to learning and remembering characters. This is consistent with the argument put forward by Wu et al. (2009). These researchers take the view that children begin to use this strategy as they become more accomplished readers.

### **Retrospective reflections on the research approach adopted**

This reading conference, and particularly the three-way dialogue that took place in the think-aloud session, enabled me to provide an in-depth account of Ying Yan's strategies for dealing with some of the challenges of becoming a reader of Chinese, and into his own understandings of the task he was engaging in, in a particular kind of learning environment. A similar range of insights emerged from the reading conferences with the other five children in the wider study. This highly focused kind of qualitative research serves as a means of shedding light on the ways



in which children conceptualise their own learning and their use of diverse scripts in the different domains of their lives.

Whilst the reading conferences in this study, and the think-aloud sessions, took place outside the classroom and were not part of the usual classroom-based routines of the complementary school, they constituted a valuable means of creating a space for three-way dialogue between individual children, their teacher and me, in my role as researcher. The three-way dialogue enabled me to take account of the perspectives and understandings of the children and their teacher as I interpreted the miscue data and as I built a detailed picture of each child's strategies for learning to read Chinese. It was thus a means of incorporating the emic perspectives and understandings of the children and their teacher and of moving beyond my own etic perspectives as the researcher. Furthermore, the three-way dialogue generated additional insights, such as Ying Yan's own personal mnemonics and his imaginative way of drawing on pictographic cues in Chinese characters to jog his memory, or his in-class strategy of circling new words 'on the page' or annotating passages in his textbook.

So this kind of focused data-gathering and data interpretation, with individual children and their teachers, definitely has a role to play in research on early literacy development, especially when it is combined with other research methods such as audio-recording of regular classroom routines, and with other data-gathering activities such as interviews with teachers and parents.

The think-aloud sessions, and the three-way dialogue that took place within them, were particularly appropriate for the setting in which my study was carried out. As Gregory and Ruby (2011) have argued, researchers working in multilingual settings need to explore ways of incorporating dialogue into their work, as a means of engaging with difference. As we know

from research of the last decade, there are considerable advantages that accrue from work in research teams, where researchers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds can engage in data-gathering and data-interpretation together, interrogating different perspectives and building a fuller and richer account. Jones et al. (2000) have illustrated these advantages with reference to research on multilingual literacy practices and have provided examples of ways of designing ethnographic research on literacy in dialogic ways. In their linguistic ethnographic work in complementary schools, Creese et al. (2008) have shown us how multilingual research teams can be organised so as to bring the voices of all team members into the overall research narrative. As I have endeavoured to show in this article, it is also possible for those working as lone researchers, as doctoral researchers or in a small scale project, to create spaces for dialogue with research participants. The linguistic and cultural diversity of classrooms in the twenty first century – in mainstream or complementary schools – provide rich zones for reciprocal learning. As Cook-Sather (2009)<sup>iv</sup> has put it, we need to aim at “bringing difference into dialogue” in our research practice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ying Yan is a fictitious name that was chosen to preserve confidentiality

<sup>1</sup> Of the nine basic tones of Cantonese, six are commonly used, and changing the pitch level can alter the meaning of the character. Cantonese has nine tones 1= high level; 2=high rising; 3= mid-level; 4= low falling; 5= low rising; 6= low level; 7= glottalized high; 8= glottalized mid; and 9= glottalized low. Even with tonal distinctions, this does not eliminate lexical ambiguities associated with the massive number of Chinese homophones (syllables which sound the same but have different meanings and are distinctive in writing). It is claimed that on average eleven characters share one pronunciation but the distinctive graphic form provides ‘an escape from rampant homophony’ (Tan and Perfetti, 1998: 168).

<sup>1</sup> The character [樣] is used in conjunction with [這] to form the two character lexical unit [樣 這] meaning “in this way”.

<sup>1</sup> Cook-Sather (2009) was actually writing about pedagogy and about taking account of learners’ perspectives. This principle also holds for research practice, particularly in research conducted in culturally diverse schools and classrooms.

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